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DOE FOR CAROLYN GAY

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: NIGERIAN ELECTION "HOLIDAY" DENOUNCED AS POLITICAL
PLOY

REF: A. A) ABUJA 685

[1](#)B. B) ABUJA 681

Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell for reasons 1.4 (b & d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: President Obasanjo's sudden April 11 announcement of public holidays on April 12 and 13, supposedly to facilitate travel for the April 14 gubernatorial elections, has been widely denounced as a transparent political ploy intended to postpone the Supreme Court's hearing of Vice President Atiku's appeal against his exclusion from the presidential ballot. The delay of the hearing (especially if the holidays are repeated prior to the April 21 presidential poll) makes it very unlikely Atiku could make it onto the ballot, even if he wins in court. The surprise holiday (which, official announcements notwithstanding, has affected banks, gas stations, etc.) will also pose logistical difficulties for opposition preparations for the crucial gubernatorial races. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) Early on the afternoon of April 11, President Obasanjo issued a surprise announcement declaring April 12 and 13 "work-free days to enable people to travel in order to participate in the gubernatorial and state house of assembly elections" scheduled for April 14. According to the official statement, President Obasanjo declared the holidays in order to facilitate "free, fair, peaceful and credible elections."

[1](#)3. (C) Few observers here believe the explanation for the decision, instead linking it to Vice President Atiku Abubakar's case before the Supreme Court (which had been scheduled to be heard the morning of April 12) challenging his exclusion from the presidential ballot by the Independent National Election Commission (INEC). Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, speaking at an awards ceremony in Abuja later on April 11, denounced the declaration as an "abuse of power" intended "to fool Nigerians," noting that it was obviously linked to the President's personal feud with Atiku. Abia State Governor (and PPA Presidential candidate) Orji Kalu made the same point, calling the holiday declaration "unnecessary and political," and "a fake" which was only declared "because some people are in court."

[1](#)4. (SBU) Atiku's hearing before the Supreme Court has now been postponed until Monday, April 16, which will leave little time to add the Vice President's name to the ballot,

even if he were to win the case. Several press reports noted that the Atiku case also had implications for several gubernatorial candidates who continue fighting for a place on this weekend's ballot after INEC had excluded them.

¶15. (C) The surprise move will also almost certainly cause logistical problems for opposition parties which had no advance warning of the decision. In its reaction to the announcement, Atiku's Action Congress party charged that "this insidious act has effectively robbed all political parties, with the exception of the (ruling) People's Democratic Party, of the chance to carry out the necessary logistics, including dispatching funds and materials to party agents." While the holiday declaration exempted "banks and other essential services," checks by some of our election partners (IFES, NDI and IRI) indicate that banks are, in fact, closed. One of our election partners reported that, even after the April 11 announcement, commercial banks were having to restrict withdrawals, apparently because the Central Bank was limiting the funds made available to them.

¶16. (C) Comment: We find it difficult to accept the GON's explanation for this surprise last-minute decision. We note that travelers routinely go from one end to the other of this country in one (long) day, that no previous Nigerian election has been preceded by even a one-day holiday, and that the short notice may in fact make travel more difficult as people scramble for the funds and gasoline needed for their journeys. We also note that the holiday is likely to further complicate INEC's efforts to complete elections preparations, as it is apparently still recruiting and training the short-term staff needed to man 122,000 polling stations. End comment.
CAMPBELL